

The Briefing



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Children's ministry: Overcoming obstacles

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In this occasional series, Bruce Linton and I (Gordon) look at some principles of leading children's ministry. Bruce has been a children's ministry leader for nearly 20 years. For some of that time, I have followed him around with a camera, a sound recorder, a laptop and three daughters, in an attempt to document and imitate some fine gospel ideas.

In an earlier article (*Briefing* #406), we said that the first principle of children's ministry is that we are all in it together. Every single person who loves and trusts Jesus, and is involved in their local church, will want to minister to children. They'll do this by parenting them, praying for them, volunteering to help teach them, or by fixing the gate that zippy toddlers can crawl through in seconds.

The second and even more important principle of children's ministry is that we want to evangelize children (and their families too, but we will save that for the third principle).

We've only rated this second because of the justifiable fear that many churches will want to completely outsource their children's work to an already overstressed and underpaid children's worker. Stories abound. As most of the Western world's workers might describe themselves as overstressed and underpaid, this is not something that a children's worker should weep bitter and silent tears over. But it matters, especially for those who are concerned for a gospel-focused ministry, or for those who want to keep their children's worker on the team for more than two years before they leave for a less stressful job. For it is most definitely a problem if a church family, or a family, decide to completely outsource evangelism (including evangelizing children) to a professional. All disciples, not just those who are paid, are

called to make disciples. Everyone in the church family ought to care about the salvation of their own church family's children. The children's worker is there to help.

A question occurs. Do our children really need to be evangelized? Aren't the children of believers (especially) already in special relationship with God through their faithful parents? Some churches even recognize that special relationship by baptizing babies, and exhorting them to "fight manfully against the world, the flesh, and the devil".

We can address this question in two ways.

The first is to say that the Bible clearly teaches, contrary to a common view, that no-one is born innocent. It is not just Pharisees who insist "You were born in utter sin" ([John 9:34](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%209.34) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%209.34>)). The Bible itself, and those who believe it, teach that sin has become part of our spiritual DNA. It has been so since the time when Adam rejected God's rule by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That's why Paul insists that "sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" ([Rom 5:12](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rom%205.12) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rom%205.12>)).

Secondly, let's answer a question with a question. What is evangelism? The answer is that evangelism is calling out the news that Jesus, only Jesus, reveals the kingly glory of our heavenly Father. He does this by paying the price for our sin, and rising to life in order to pour out his Holy Spirit on us.

There are many and better summaries than this. JI Packer summarizes the gospel as "adoption through propitiation".¹ ([#fn-25024-1](#)). The Bible summarizes the eternal gospel as this: "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgement has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water" ([Rev 14:7](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev%2014.7) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev%2014.7>)). For a different yet equally profound summary, see [John 3:16](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%203.16) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%203.16>). Whatever your preferred variation of the unchangeable message of Jesus' death and resurrection, telling people (including those who already believe it) is a lifelong process. There is no reason to exclude believing children from hearing that joyful, laughter-filled message again and again, in many different ways, and using as many parts of the Bible as we possibly can. So let's get on with it.

What obstacles stand in the way? Apart from those ancient enemies—the world, the flesh, and the devil, which are defeated only by prayer—we identify three things: lack of desire, lack of imagination, and lack of opportunity.

Lack of desire

Firstly, we lack desire. In the family itself, one or both parents may not be Christian. Even if they are, life may be so full of pressure, anxiety, or even pleasant alternatives to Bible reading (like sleeping) that we rarely get around to what used

to be known as the 'quiet time'. The quiet time is that time of day where we spend time reading the Bible and praying, but in many families it is more likely to be known as the "Quiet!" time, or the "Get off that computer!" time.

For those who don't have their own children, lack of desire can be an even bigger problem. It takes a big step to love other peoples' children, and an even bigger step to lay our lives on the line by volunteering to love and care for them with time, energy, and conversation about the deep things of God. Even those of us who are prepared to spill blood for our Saviour, Jesus, will sometimes baulk at spilling ourselves out of bed on Sunday morning to teach children.

The only real answer to our lack of desire is to ask God's Holy Spirit to change us. We should ask God to change us so that we will love others, even to the extent of making us like Jesus in our desire to welcome little children into the kingdom.

That said, there is nothing like regular Bible reading, with lollies as prizes for answers to correct questions, to help overcome inertia. Lollies will not put back in what the Holy Spirit has left out, but the family will have fun around the dinner table. And given that Bible reading is an inherently life-changing activity, we can pray with confidence that the Holy Spirit will use his word to transform our hearts, and the hearts of our children.

Lack of imagination

The second obstacle to evangelizing children is that we lack ideas.

I always think here of Bart of *The Simpsons* cartoon fame, defiantly telling his father that he doesn't care if he's not allowed to see the movie. He will use his imagination. A thought bubble with two movie characters standing inside it appears above Bart's head. For a full ten seconds, an imaginary cat and mouse stand there as blank-faced as Bart, until he realizes that it's not going to work. Not all people are blessed with imagination in equal quantities.

In my experience, spending time with Bruce will in no way cure the nervous parent (or children's ministry helper) of their concern that they, like Bart, have a vacuum-filled thought bubble above their heads when it comes to teaching even their own children. Bruce comes up with six new ideas about ministry before breakfast. The rest of us, however, need assistance.

So here are three straightforward ideas that may be a help.

Idea one: start early, start young, start often. Tortoise beats hare as surely as rock beats scissors. If you start reading the Bible (or a good children's storybook Bible such as the *Big Picture Bible*) as soon as baby is able to sit on your lap, he or she will never realize that you lack imagination. They will just enjoy sitting with you.

The same principle works later on in childhood. I managed to teach three daughters to recite most of [Romans 1](https://bible.com/bible/esv/Rom%201) (<https://bible.com/bible/esv/Rom%201>) from memory, each from about the age of four or five, before they realized that this was a ridiculous thing to ask of little children, and well before they realized that friends at school might not think this was a cool thing to do. My response to later complaints? “Too late. You’ve already learnt it. You can’t unlearn it now. Have a lolly.”

Idea two: imagination is over-rated. In starting to teach the Bible, go for quality over quantity. Just read a short bit of the real, grown-ups Bible each night, no pictures, no games, then ask an easy question and pray. If one minute is all you or the children can bear, then thank God for that one minute and be happy. If on the other hand you are able to imitate the uber-efforts of some blogging women (Jean Williams at jeaninallhonesty.blogspot.com and Nicole Starling at 168hrs.blogspot.com.au spring to mind), then do that. Just don’t beat up on yourself if your eight year old is not, Spurgeon-like, reading the great Puritan writers in his spare time. It is good that he or she sees and hears from you that you love Jesus and trust him for the salvation of your soul.

Bruce’s grandfather used to read the Bible to him on his childhood holidays—an old-fashioned Bible with no pictures, including words like ‘thus’, ‘redemption’ and ‘justification’. It was the first time in Bruce’s life that he realized he could read the Bible and, with occasional prompts from his grandpa, make sense of it. It changed his attitude to God permanently.

Idea three: who needs imagination when there is a children’s worker at church?

We may not want to outsource all our evangelism to this faithful individual. But when it comes to plagiarism, that is what we pay the children’s worker for—namely, to steal their best ideas and use them with our children. With very little pressure, Bruce has been known to give away his *Walking With God* board game to parents who want to sit around at the dinner table playing it with their children. No, you can’t have Bruce’s home address. But be assured that this board game involves nothing more complicated than a board, some counters, a Bible, and some lollies (not included). Should this series of articles continue long enough, further details may appear.

Lack of opportunity

The third obstacle to consider is lack of opportunity. What if I have no children? What if there is no children’s ministry happening in my church?

Dear friends, opportunities abound. The best thing you can do is pray for open doors for evangelism, especially (if so inclined) for children’s evangelism. Do you have nieces and nephews, or grandchildren? Read the Bible to them and pray for them. Don’t be a stranger; visit them often.

Look for opportunities. In our Australian corner of the world, Christian churches (and other religious groups) have a legislated right to enter schools on a weekly basis and teach the Bible to children from their own denomination, and to any other children whose parents would like them to attend those classes. If you can do something like this, offer to help. Even if you can't teach, you can become friends with the one who is teaching and lighten their load just by turning up and doing what you can. Find an urban or beach mission and join the team. See if there are Christian holiday clubs or kids camps you can assist with. Offer to give your Sunday school teacher a break over the school holidays and take their place for a week or two.

While we are on this subject, some of the best evangelists to children are... other children! Don't ever hesitate to encourage children to bring their friends to hear the gospel at your kids' club, or to talk to their friends about what they learnt. If you're the one responsible for transporting your child to church or Friday night church activities, invest in that most dorky of dad's accessories, the people mover, so that you can offer lifts to the friends of children as well. What you lose in petrol economy and daddy coolness you may make up for in eternity (this I think is an application of [Luke 16:1-13](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2016.1-13) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2016.1-13>), but that discussion may be had another day).

Children are human too

None of this suggests that children's evangelism is going to be an easy thing to do, and the most difficult thing about it will not be some of the specific obstacles mentioned so far. It will be that children, like their parents, and like all humans, don't really want to hear the gospel.

They will of course be delighted to hear the good bits of the gospel. God made a beautiful, glorious world and made us as his highest delight, blessing us beyond imagination. Even when things went awry, he loved us and purposed to bless us and chose great heroes of faith to show us how much he wanted us to be his children. Finally, God sent Jesus, who loves even little children, to show the amazing love and mercy of his Father to the whole world, and to bring us to heaven to be with him.

All this is true and even those who have no connection with the church are happy to hear it.

But one day Bruce and I sat with some concerned parents in the office of our local school principal, invited there because one woman's six-year-old child had come home from Scripture class talking about hell. The little boy had worked out from the Scripture classes we taught that it was indeed the place where those who rejected Jesus would end up spending eternity.

That particular meeting ended well, with the secularist school principal suggesting that we might like to give parents of the incoming kindergarten children a summary of what we would be teaching at school next year, just so they could

make an informed choice about whether or not to send their children to school Scripture. The school would then include the material we produced by way of introduction inside the new parents' orientation pack. We left rejoicing!

What the incident highlights is that those who are serious about telling people the gospel will run into problems. The message itself will contain true things that, if we wanted to make our own lives more comfortable, we would rather not speak about. We love to tell people about Samson the strong man and David the shepherd boy, or babies in mangers. We are slightly more anxious in describing Ehud, who plunged his sword into the king's belly until the fat swallowed up the sword hilt. And I cannot remember the last time I heard someone teach children about the day that Jephthah sacrificed his little daughter in order to keep a promise to God.

Examples of teaching these difficult things can be held over for another article that may appear in the distant future. But in the meantime, let's consider one particular example of a part of the gospel that must be told, yet goes completely against the teaching that children will be hearing almost everywhere else in their lives. That is that they, like the rest of us, are sinners.

The trouble here is that, apart from our innate and sinful certainty that we are not sinners, we have instead been taught from the earliest age that Santa will reward the nice and ignore the naughty. The whole of life seems to be permeated with the idea that we get reward for achieving things by our own effort.

Our legalistic natures mean that the Santa clause in our thinking becomes a useful disciplinary tool during the month of December, and accords nicely with our sense of pride in our own human achievement. The difficulty is that such a view of sin misunderstands human nature, minimizes the seriousness of sin, and misses the heart of the Bible's teaching on the subject.

The Bible teaches not first and foremost that we are rulebreakers who need to do better at keeping rules. It teaches that, at heart, we hate the rulemaker. We would literally rather die than bow the knee to him.

So how do we tell children about the Bible's view of sin? Two examples, one of how to do it, and one cautionary tale for puppeteers, will help spark some ideas.

Bruce's current favoured method of explaining sin is the 'Olympic podium'. This is an easy and portable arrangement involving cardboard or corrugated plastic cut in a podium shape and propped up by chairs. God (we explain) stands in the gold medal position. He is of course number one because he created the world and everything in it, including those who stand next to him on the podium—which is us. It's not generally necessary to explain that the rest of creation comes in third.

Sin, then, is when I stand in the number two position—which is where I belong—but decide to try to push God off the podium and stand in his place. I disobey my parents, who were put there by God to care for me—it's as if I am saying to God, "I don't care what you think, I am number one". I take my younger sibling's bike, knowing that he can't chase after me to get it back—it's as if I'm saying to God, "I'm number one, it's not my job to look after the brother you gave me".

Theologically, this sort of illustration sidesteps our natural human tendency to list off wicked deeds, equate them with sin, and in the process ignore the underlying sickness and rebellion of the human heart.

The second example is more of a caution. When populating puppet shows with interesting characters, resist at all costs the temptation to have the good puppet (who reads the Bible, does what mum says and always cleans up) and the bad puppet (who doesn't). Inevitably, the message communicated will be morality, with children learning that to win God's approval, we must imitate the good and disown the bad. This is more Santa Claus theology, undermining the untruth that the world is divided into naughty and nice.

Instead, make the puppets (or characters in the skit) into real people with a real relationship, tackling a problem together. Find a furry orange muppet, give him an insatiable appetite for chocolate biscuits, have him interact in conversation with the children's worker, and let the children's worker explain things that the little orange furry guy doesn't understand about God. The interactions they have will be far more flexible and fertile than any mere morality tales that we may come up with.

Ultimately, children's ministry is no harder or easier to do than ministry to any other human being. Children are not some strange and different category of beast like unicorns or pandas. They are humans like their parents: enemies of God who, by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and through his resurrection from the dead, have been given the opportunity to receive new birth into a living hope, through trust in his name.

1. JI Packer, *Knowing God*, *InterVarsity Press*, Downers Grove, 1973, p. 214. [↗](#) ([#fnref-25024-1](#)).

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